

Jim Dudley Lifts Brays Bayou Drawbridge, Hopes Young 'Gad-About' Never Gets His Job

By SIGMAN BYRD

The Stroller

IN THESE DAYS of modern inconveniences, it is mildly comforting to know that Jim Dudley can always be reached at Wayside 5410, because you never know when you may want to bring a boat with a 20-odd-foot mast up Brays Bayou.

And it is literally impossible to navigate Brays west of Harrisburg boulevard in a boat with superstructures rising more than 13 feet Plimsoll, without Mr. Dudley. For he operates the Harrisburg drawbridge.

BYRD

"Don't you write anything that will get me fired," Mr. Dudley warned as we sat on the front porch of his home at 1715 Reese, within good hearing distance of the telephone. "It's not that the city couldn't get another drawbridge operator. But they might get a young fellow who likes to gad around. Me, I'm 63, and my gadding is behind me."

Once in a great while—once



every few months or so—Mr. Dudley will cross his fingers and try to catch the feature at the Broadway. But he doesn't do this very often, because it entails almost as complicated a setup as raising the bridge itself. Besides a staff composed of a telephone sitter, a runner, and a theater usher, there is also a system of intricate signals which need not concern Brays Bayou pilots directly.

Drawing the bridge is no simple matter, but all the pilot must do is notify Mr. Dudley when he wants to pass. Mr. Dudley must notify the fire and police departments, catch a bus to the bridge, go under the bridge slab and start a gasoline motor, then switch on the amber signal and finally the red.

Goes Into Reverse

After climbing back to street level and checking traffic (there's a cop to help at night) Mr. Dudley climbs into a cage on the east side of the bridge and manipulates levers that boost him and the slab to the desired clearance. When the boat has passed, of course, he goes into reverse.

A blue-eyed little Scotsmen with hair as gray as a gull, Mr. Dudley has been on the job four

years and likes it better than growing flowers, which occupied him since his wife died and all his children left home to marry. "I lift that bridge as often as 23 times a week," he says, "and I never had but one accident. A man who said he was a stranger in town drove right over the bridge one night when she was five inches up. He broke two springs, ruined all his tires, and had to pay a \$10 fine. Seems like he said he was from Pasadena."

Take an Incident

IT WAS SID PORTER, sometime a strolling Houston newspaper reporter and afterward an author of note, who said, I believe, that there never was a story where there seemed to be one. But who can say whether a piece of writing is a story or not, except the reader?

Take an incident. A panhandler approaches a reporter on the corner of Main and Texas, asks for a cigaret, gets it, asks for a dime and gets that. No story.

Take the same incident. Recall everything that happened, every detail. The panhandler is a thin, nervous man, with black, graying hair, pouches under his eyes. He walks with a heavy cane, awkwardly, stooped, and his

black worsted suit is well worn, not too clean nor recently pressed. He stops, leans on his cane, looks up at the reporter bleakly.

"Hay, Mac, got an extra cigaret?"

Then, quickly, before the reporter can answer, he jumps backward, cringing. "Don't hit me!" he walls. "Don't hit me. I just asked for a cigaret."

He gets it, with shaking fingers. Even his lips tremble as he accepts a light. "What made you think I was going to hit you?"

"They do," he says. "Sometimes, when I ask."

They All Have Story

Let him talk. They all have a story. His is not too different. He's a veteran, he says, of Verdun. He was gassed, he recovered. Until a year ago he was a skilled tailor, earning close to \$2 an hour. Then he took sick. At a hospital they put a needle into his spine to see what ailed him, and they left it in too long. He became paralyzed, unable to move except in palsied pain.

"I can't even thread a needle, Mac."

Now he lives in a Home. That's what they call it, but he calls it something else. "Nobody to talk to there. They're all psychos

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but me. I have to drink to keep from going nuts. Just been on a big one. They rolled me, Mac. Didn't even leave me bus fare to that place . . .

Give him a dime. Three more touches, and he can buy a fifth of fortified cannery skinnings that will ransom him from the Home for an afternoon behind a billboard on the bayou shore. With the fourth swallow forgetfulness will come like a chlorine cloud, and the pain, the palsy and the shame will vanish.

Pretend he's going to catch a bus. Talk to him a little. Don't say much. Just treat him like a human being; see what he does.

"Listen, Mac. I'm not a bum. You know that. Don't you?" Sure.

"It's just that—when you get like this you—you do things you wouldn't do, if—if—"

He drops his cane, covers his face with shivering hands, begins sobbing, like a hurt child.

No. Sid Porter was right. For a while it looked like a story, so of course it wasn't.